

B. J. Sokol and Mary Sokol *Shakespeare, Law, and Marriage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. x+262. ISBN 0521822637

This is the kind of book to which those in the know turn when they need properly to apply historical knowledge to a point of interpretation in literature or drama. One a legal academic and the other a literary academic, the Sokols's previous collaborative book, the indispensable dictionary of *Shakespeare's Legal Language*, put everything into A-Z order. This one takes as its focus the area of law that most affected most people in Shakespeare's time, marriage, and it moves chapter-by-chapter through the (usually chronological) stages of courtship, endowment, spousal, solemnization, divorce, and death, to indicate the rules, rights, rituals and obligations that governed them.

There are many surprises. Despite contemporary disquiet about it, spousal required nothing more than the individuals' honest declaration of consent. Consummation and solemnization were desirable but not essential, and hence, according to English law, Ferdinand and Miranda actually get themselves fully married ("MIRANDA My husband then? / FERDINAND Ay", 3.1.88-9) in the middle of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Almost everything in Shakespeare is done according to English law, or dramatic extrapolation of it, and the Sokols uncover a stream of legal allusions previously unnoticed. The reasons for his wanting to marry that the clown Lavatch gives Countess Roussillon are, in their order and meaning, a parody of the reasons for the existence of the honourable estate given in the Elizabethan Prayer Book (*All's Well that Ends Well* 1.3.28-55).

To understand Shakespeare it is worth knowing that he used the word dower three different ways. These were the correct way (a widow's right to a one-third share of her deceased husband's property), and two wrong ways: pre-marital payment to a groom by the bride's family (properly called dowry), and a counter-arrangement made to provide for a widow while preventing her from claiming dower (properly called jointure). To demonstrate how such things matter, the Sokols show that Petruccio's offer that Katherine may, upon his death, claim dower (*The Taming of the Shrew* 2.1.123-5) is considerably more valuable than the mere jointures offered by her younger sister's suitors; such (eccentric?) generosity would have impressed the first audiences.

Those editing and commenting upon Shakespeare's texts will benefit from such scrupulously scholarly distinctions that the book provides, and so will anyone wanting to mount performances that get right the meanings and associations of legal terms and events concerning marriage in the plays. Beyond such professionals, the book will find readers amongst all serious appreciators of Shakespeare--indeed, all readers of Renaissance Literature--because the Sokols's immense learning is conveyed in unambiguous, graceful prose.

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